

20 of the best hikes to see Colorado's fall gold

Colorado's beautiful fall colors don't arrive all at once, they come down the state like a tide, starting in the north around the middle of September, and finishing in the Elk Mountains near the end of the month. If you've only got one weekend, pick your region by the date, not the other way around, and you'll be standing in it at exactly the right time.

These are the twenty we recommend with varying degrees of difficulty, sorted into four regions with the pass or byway that gets you there. Take the earliest start you can stand - on the weekends, the pull-offs and parking lots at Kenosha, Guanella Pass and Maroon Lake are full by 10:00 a.m.

READ THIS FIRST

Aspens turn from the top down. If a trailhead looks green, drive 1,000 ft higher and you'll usually find it.

Peak holds about ten days, then one hard wind night takes it.



Front Range · Golden Gate Canyon State Park, Golden



High Rockies · Twin Lakes, US-24



Central Rockies · near Difficult Campground, Aspen

01 Northern Colorado

Peak: Sept 13 - 17

Steamboat and Cameron Pass, on CO-14.

02 Front Range

Peak: Sept 15 - 20

Guanella Pass and Grand Lake, off I-70 and US-40.

03 High Rockies

Peak: Sept 17 - 22

Breckenridge and Kenosha Pass, off US-285.

04 Central Rockies

Peak: Sept 19 - 26

Aspen and Crested Butte, over Independence or Kebler Pass.



Trails, drives and how hard they'll hit you



01 Northern Colorado

Sept 13 - 17

Rabbit Ears Peak · Moderate

Steamboat · 5.6 mi round trip off Rabbit Ears Pass, FS 315. Gold meadows the whole way to the rock.

Fish Creek Falls · Easy

Steamboat · 0.5 mi to the lower falls, 5 mi if you push to the upper. Ten minutes from town.

Lake Agnes · Moderate

Cameron Pass, State Forest SP · 1.8 mi, steep for ten minutes. Park pass required.

Zimmerman Lake · Easy

CO-14 below the pass · 2.2 mi loop through the best aspen and spruce mix on the drive.

Horsetooth Rock · Moderate

Ft. Collins · 4.6 mi, 1,400 ft. Foothill scrub oak reds rather than aspen gold.



03 High Rockies

Sept 17 - 22

McCullough Gulch · Moderate

Breckenridge · 3 mi to the falls and upper lake. Reserved parking in season - book it.

Kenosha Pass, Colorado Trail · Easy

US-285, Fairplay side · 2 to 6 mi either direction. The postcard. Go on a Tuesday.

Booth Falls · Strenuous

Vail · 4 mi round trip, 1,500 ft. Tiny trailhead lot, full by 8am. Take the bus.

Shrine Ridge · Moderate

Vail Pass · 4.4 mi to the ridge. Gore Range on one side, gold basins on the other.

Lily Pad Lake · Easy

Silverthorne · 3.2 mi through aspen to two small lakes above the reservoir.



02 Front Range

Sept 15 - 20

Abyss Lake · Strenuous

Guanella Pass, Georgetown · 16 mi, 2,900 ft. All day. Walk the first two miles if that's all you want.

St. Mary's Glacier · Easy

Idaho Springs · 1.5 mi on loose rock to the lake. Paid lot only - the shoulder gets ticketed.

Horseshoe & Raccoon Loop · Moderate

Golden Gate Canyon SP, Golden · 2.6 or 3.5 mi. Panorama Point at first light.

Adams Falls & East Inlet · Easy

Grand Lake · 0.6 mi to the falls, 3 mi to the meadow. Elk are bugling this week.

Mason Creek & Lodge Pole Loop · Moderate

Conifer, Meyer Ranch · 4.2 mi. The quiet one, thirty minutes from Denver.



04 Central Rockies

Sept 19 - 26

Cathedral Lake · Strenuous

Aspen, Castle Creek Rd · 5.6 mi, 2,000 ft of switchbacks. Worth every one of them.

Crater Lake, Maroon Bells · Moderate

Aspen · 3.6 mi from Maroon Lake. Shuttle reservation required in fall - no exceptions.

Judd Falls · Easy

Crested Butte, Gothic · 1.7 mi. Pair it with the Kebler Pass drive the same morning.

Rim Trail · Moderate

Snowmass Village · 4 mi with the whole Elk Range in front of you. Start at Sinclair Rd.

Beaver Lake to Crystal Mill Rd · Moderate

Marble · 2 mi easy, then as far up the old road as you like. High clearance beyond.

FIVE THINGS WE'D TELL YOU AT THE TRAILHEAD

Easy · Moderate · Strenuous

01

Go early. The light is better before nine and the lot still has room.

02

Take a weekday if you can. Saturday at Kenosha is a parade.

03

Check CDOT before any pass. September snow closes them without much warning.

04

Don't park on the shoulder and stay on the trail. Aspen roots sit inches down.

05

For photographs, stand so the sun comes through the leaves mid-morning, not on them.